United Nations A/53/302

General Assembly

Distr.: General
27 August 1998

Original: English

Fifty-third session
Item 116 of the provisional agenda*
Programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999

Office accommodation at the Palais Wilson

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

It will be recalled that following consideration of the reports of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/52/19 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1), as well as the related report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (A/52/7/Add.4), the General Assembly, in its decision 52/465 of 25 March 1998, approved the proposal of the Secretary-General to accept the offer of the Swiss authorities to place the office accommodation at the Palais Wilson in Geneva at the disposal of the United Nations. At the same time, the General Assembly decided, *inter alia*, to request that a cost-benefit analysis be submitted at the next part of its resumed fifty-second session on the use of the existing conference facilities available at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

The present report attempts to provide the information and clarification requested by the General Assembly on the issue.

1. In his reports on office accommodations at the Palais Wilson, the Secretary-General indicated that there was a need for three conference rooms at the Palais: one currently existing with a capacity to accommodate 100 to 120 delegates; one smaller room, which would seat 60 to 80 delegates, involving neither construction nor structural changes but needing to be equipped with furniture and interpretation features; and a third room envisaged with a seating capacity for some 120 delegates, requiring structural changes and construction, utilizing funds made available by the Government of Switzerland (A/C.5/52/19, para. 7, and A/C.5/52/19/Add.1, paras. 10 to 13).

2. A number of questions were raised regarding the need for the third room and, as a corollary, the impact that the move of a number of human rights meetings would have on the occupancy of conference rooms at the Palais des Nations. The present report addresses these two issues.

* A/53/150

98-25671 (E) 220998

Need for three conference rooms at the Palais Wilson

3. Based on the calendar of meetings for 1997 and 1998, as well as the number and type of meetings scheduled for 1999, which at this juncture is expected to increase rather than decrease, in paragraphs 11 to 13 of his report (A/C.5/52/19/Add.1), the Secretary-General explained that the three conference rooms at the Palais Wilson were needed to accommodate all human rights meetings, except those of the Commission on Human Rights and the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, which would continue to be held at the Palais des Nations.

4. The programme of meetings conducted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights throughout the year includes a high concentration of medium and small sized meetings involving, at times, intensive input from the human rights substantive and administrative sectors. The 1998 list of middle and small size meetings is in the order of some 120, of a duration varying from one to two days to three weeks; these are made up of meetings of treaty bodies, open-ended working groups of a standard setting nature, meetings of boards of trustees, working groups, special rapporteurs, etc. These meetings are expected to occupy the Palais Wilson facilities on a full-time basis.

5. While participation and input at these meetings could be provided on an ongoing basis at the Palais Wilson by the staff concerned, without greatly impeding the regular work schedule, the same cannot be said if these meetings were to continue to be held at the Palais des Nations, since this would virtually paralyse the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as it would entail staff spending most of their time at the Palais des Nations waiting to be called to these meetings, or alternatively, delaying these meetings whilst the required staff shuttles back and forth between the Palais Wilson and the Palais des Nations. It would therefore be both inefficient and a waste of the resources of the Office of the High Commissioner to have these meetings take place outside the Palais Wilson. Further, it would be detrimental to the service provided to Member States, since service would be that much slower and less productive.

6. For the larger, more formal events to be held at the Palais des Nations, such as the annual sessions of the Commission on Human Rights and the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and the entire range of satellite meetings that take place in connection with these sessions, a nucleus of staff would be posted in temporary offices at the Palais des Nations for the duration of these sessions.

Impact on occupancy of conference rooms at the Palais des Nations

7. The total number of meetings at the Palais des Nations increased from 5,828 meetings in 1988 to 6,831 meetings in 1992 and to 7,859 meetings in 1997, representing an overall increase of some 35 per cent between 1988 and 1997, or an increase of 225 meetings per year (meetings are measured in 3-hour units). From 1992 to 1997 the related increase has been 15 per cent or some 200 meetings per year.

8. If particular focus is placed on the 19 meeting rooms of the size needed to accommodate the human rights meetings scheduled to be held at the Palais Wilson, the data is as follows: 4,137 meetings were held in such rooms in 1992, while 4,857 meetings took place in 1997, an increase of some 17 per cent or an average increase of some 150 meetings per year. Projections for 1998 of the number of meetings indicates that there will be an increase in the number of meetings of the magnitude experienced in the preceding 5-year period. Should the increase in the number of meetings continue to follow this trend, it is estimated that four years hence, some 750 additional meetings would need to be serviced at the United Nations Office at Geneva in rooms similar in size to those currently used for human rights meetings, excluding those of the Commission and Subcommission. These additional requirements would, however, be addressed by the release of meeting rooms used by human rights bodies, if, in taking into consideration the information already provided in paragraph 12 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/52/19/Add.1), the Palais Wilson accommodates an estimated 680 human rights meetings per year.

9. Additionally, requests for meeting rooms at the Palais des Nations are more acute during the middle of the year (May to August), when there is no spare capacity at present to accommodate all such requests. Consequently, the move of human rights meetings to the conference rooms at the Palais Wilson would not only release conference room space for the anticipated increase in the number of overall meetings, but allow flexibility in the consideration of requests for meeting rooms which heretofore could not be met during the peak period and thus required rescheduling. Based on their 1998 meeting schedule, it is estimated that some 135 meetings could be accommodated during that yearly peak period.

10. The flexibility to accommodate additional meetings in meeting rooms released by human rights bodies is particularly significant as a number of the requests which could not previously be entertained had related to back-to-back or extended meetings where experts, delegates or staff members in attendance from duty stations away from Geneva had to depart and return at a later time when meeting rooms became available, thereby resulting in additional travel costs.

Conclusion

11. Based on the foregoing, and recalling that the existing two conference rooms at the Palais Wilson would not require construction activity, the General Assembly may wish to note the plans of the Secretary-General to proceed with completion of the construction of the third conference room at the Palais Wilson utilizing funds made available by the Government of Switzerland.